

Governance Structures

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are at least 468 entities responsible for some form of transportation planning or implementation in Washington state. These include government bodies, as well as regulatory and planning agencies, transit authorities, port districts, and tribes. The authority of the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) over Washington's transportation network is neither very strong nor very extensive. Of the over 80,000 miles of roadway in Washington state, WSDOT controls 8.8%, or about 7,000 miles. That is less than the national average of 23% for states.¹

The last major overhaul of the state's transportation system was done in 1977, when many of the transportation functions of the state were consolidated into the newly-formed Department of Transportation, governed by a Transportation Commission. WSDOT sets service objectives for state-owned modes of transportation and for facilities that are of 'statewide significance.' However, these do not include city- and county-owned streets, roads, and bridges.

Funding and policy decisions for city and county roads, and for transit, ports, and other transportation authorities are not made by WSDOT, but rather by the specific municipalities or agencies.

Funding Sources

State transportation revenue is strictly limited to how it is raised, where it can be spent, and how much it can be increased. We get a significant share of our state transportation revenues in Washington from a 23-cent per gallon tax on gasoline. The state's constitution requires that gas tax revenues be used only for highway purposes. The State Legislature, which appropriates transportation funding throughout the state, oversees the allocation of two-thirds of all gas tax revenues. The other one-third goes directly to cities and counties. State funding for city streets, county roads, and public transit occurs mainly through direct allocation, without any decision by the legislature or WSDOT. However, state funding for local streets and roads accounts for half or less of all revenues. Most (68%) of the funding for city streets and half (50%) of the funding for county roads is raised locally, through local property taxes or general fund revenues.²

¹ Governance Structures: Draft Paper

² Draft Issue Paper: Local Sources in Funding City and County Transportation Needs

Assessment of the Current Local Government Situation

By and large, the multiple governments have succeeded in creating a remarkable transportation system for the state. Their efforts seem to work best when authority for planning, deciding, funding, and implementing projects rests within a given body, such as WSDOT's responsibility for state roads, and the various transit agencies' responsibility for their transit systems. When responsibility is more diffuse, and planning requires coordination with a number of jurisdictions, the results are more mixed. In certain areas of the state, the complexity of the structure and the number of players warrant examining structures that might improve and simplify the process in those areas.

CASE STUDIES

Legislatures in other states and regions have struggled over problems with traffic congestion, pollution, sprawl, and lack of coordination among governments. Described below are five jurisdictions in which changes to transportation governance have been proposed or implemented:

- **Michigan** — the governor has proposed to provide additional funding for road projects, reform transportation agencies, and expand the state's authority of the road system;
- **San Diego** — the regional planning agency has project selection and funding powers
- **Atlanta region** — an expansive regional authority has recently been created, with transportation and land use oversight;
- **Vancouver, B. C.** — a newly-created regional authority, TransLink, has assumed responsibility for managing roads and transit, and is also responsible for planning, service levels, and funding;
- **New Zealand** — moving toward a system of public road companies, paid for by user fees.

EVALUATION

Proposed approaches to the issue of governance will be evaluated against the following criteria:

- Aligns authority and responsibility to plan, fund, and implement transportation services
- Balances the desire for local accountability with need for a system-based perspective
- Creates transportation systems able to innovate and change
- Inspires public support and increases public confidence in governance of the system
- Enables comparison among all modes of transportation, meaning that the most beneficial projects will get funded, constructed, and maintained
- Has the potential to be implemented